Taiwan: Plurality on a Changing Island

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Overview

My perspective on what it means to be Taiwanese is that of a complete outsider, having no cultural/ancestral ties to Taiwan or any of the main ethnic groups constituted within, and having never studied the island in-depth before. My experiences and interpretations of Taiwan are influenced by my being an American tourist (rather than a resident), my lack of Mandarin skills, and my passion and affinity for democracy, self-determination, and people-centered urban design.

What I saw in Taiwan was a vibrant community of diverse individuals who have differing views on what it means to be Taiwanese, but who all share an attachment to Taiwan in its own right. That is to say, to be Taiwanese is not simply (or even) to belong to a regional Chinese subculture, and it is equally reductive to suggest that Taiwanese identity exists only in reaction or opposition to Chinese identity. Nor is it a vague extrapolation of pride in some smaller identity that exists almost exclusively in Taiwan (i.e. Tayal).

To claim a Taiwanese identity is inherently political given the potentially existential consequences of using that label (especially in isolation from Chinese identity). However, save for a group of activists protesting the Chinese Communist Party's persecution of Falun Gong, I did not see evidence of individuals invoking Taiwanese identity as a political statement in daily life (adorning the Taiwanese flag, discussing national identity unprompted, etc.). This indicates to me that being Taiwanese is not simply a political label, but a cultural one – something constantly and often unconsciously negotiated through social interactions. Of course, the fluid cultural aspect of what it means to be Taiwanese is challenging to define, but I am comfortable concluding that Taiwan's culture is distinctive, being shaped but not overtaken by the many cultures that make up Taiwan's multicultural past and present.

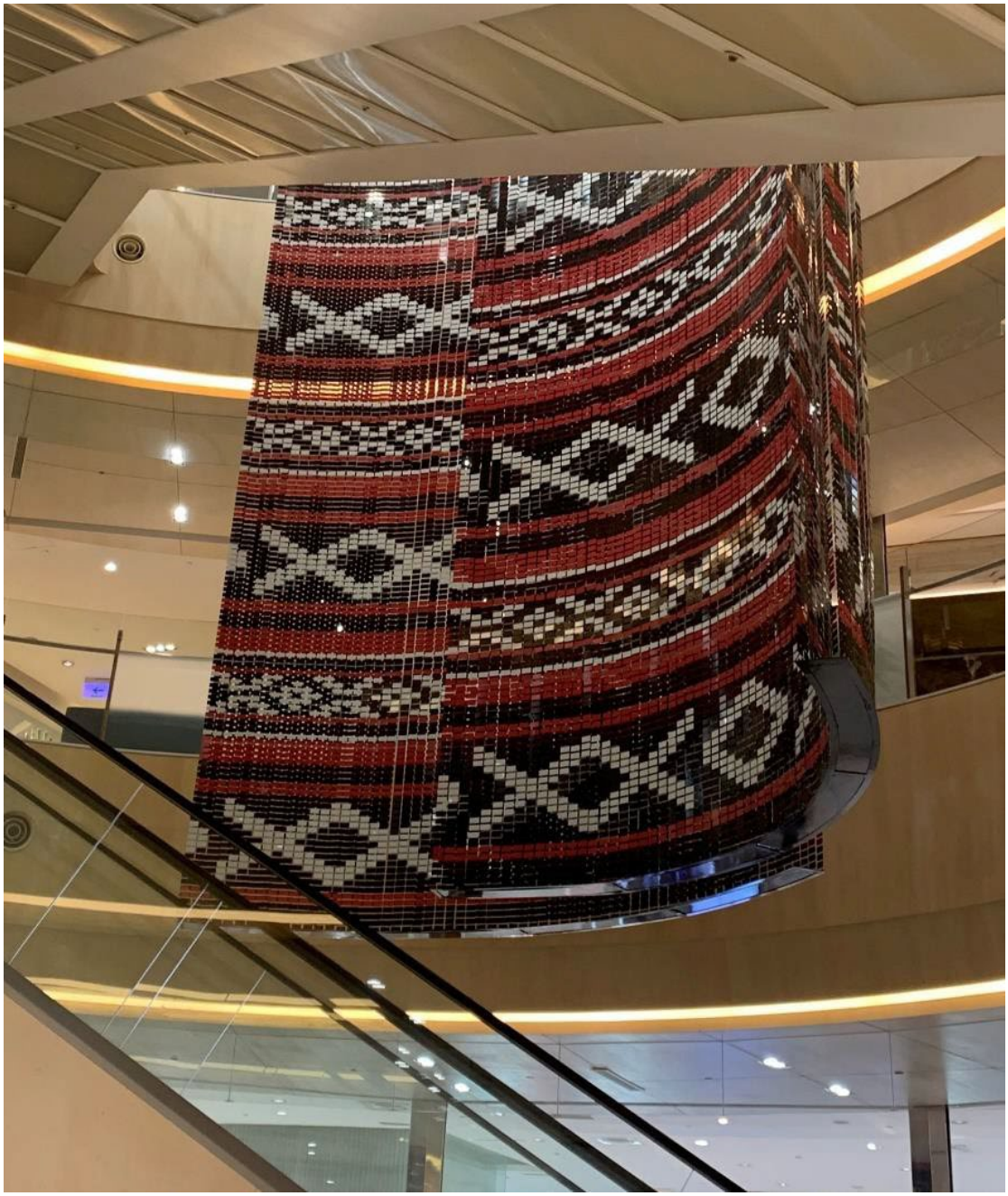
"When history is freed from political control, it can be seen from multiple perspectives and interpreted in multiple ways" (Denton, 2011a). Paradoxically, the modern Taiwanese government seems to have a similar take on Taiwanese history and

identity, tolerating plurality for the sake of self-preservation and resistance against the One China narrative. I also accept the ambiguity of identity - to be

Taiwanese, one only needs to identify as such, and it is okay if one

individual's meaning of the term is different than or even contradictory to another's. The pictures that follow encompass my best guesses as to what meaning others might make of Taiwanese identity, based on how the sociohistorical world of Taiwan contrasts my own positionality.

Photo 1: Indigeneity and Revitalization



Taiwan's human history and therefore social identity begins with its indigenous peoples. Though they make up less than 3% of the modern population of Taiwan, Indigenous Taiwanese people continue to be a crucial part of the island's story and the construction of its identity.

Attempts were made throughout Taiwan's history, particularly under Japanese colonialism and Kuomintang (KMT) rule, to erase the cultures of indigenous peoples and replace them with ideologies and practices more affirming to the foreign powers' visions for the island. Only when the rights of Indigenous Taiwanese peoples to rule themselves were called under question (under the accusation that such people were "uncivilized") could non-indigenous peoples legitimize their political domination over Taiwan.

It is both true that Indigenous Taiwanese people have preserved their identity, culture, and communities and that those things have been qualitatively and fundamentally changed by the historical processes that they were subjected to. Allen (2011) shares in the understanding that displaced cultures, even upon return to mainstream focus, can never be the same as they once were.

With a president who is partially of Paiwan descent, present-day Taiwan celebrates Indigenous Taiwanese cultures as part of what makes the island worthy of a distinct identity. Rather than relegate indigenous cultures to the past or to exclusive contexts, they are featured prominently in modern, everyday life. Take for example this art display in a mall in Hualien, which is home to a larger percentage of Indigenous Taiwanese people than any other city. The piece displays patterns and colors associated with Indigenous Taiwanese peoples, taking up space in the middle of a Western-style building filled with products modeled and consumed by Han Taiwanese people. The design of the piece is the same as what Indigenous Taiwanese peoples would have used centuries ago, but the materials and context are completely changed. So, too, is Indigenous Taiwanese identity the same as it has always been but with a radically and irreversibly changed context and meaning.

Photo 2: The Republic of China

Taiwan is officially the Republic of China (ROC), so any discussion of (mainstream) Taiwanese identity would be incomplete without acknowledging its officially Chinese foundation. The common use of the term "mainlander" in China-Taiwan discourse to reference those from the People's Republic of China (PRC) itself insinuates that China and Taiwan are part of some shared identity, as opposed to labeling PRC nationals as "foreigner" or even just "Chinese". In this way, Taiwan has significant formal and de facto claim to be Chinese.

China (whatever we consider it to be) is popularly defined to be one of the oldest countries in the world, with directly traceable regime lineage for centuries (until controversy arises over whether the Republic of China was replaced by the PRC or simply relocated in the form of KMT-controlled Taiwan). The Taiwanese ROC's founding political mythology requires its citizens to accept Taiwan as the "real" China. One way the ROC has historically justified this claim is through its preservation of "traditional" Chinese culture, in contrast to the PRC which modernized its culture in pursuit of communist ideals (Musgrove, 2017).

Much of China's tangible dynastic history is on display in Taiwan at the National Palace Museum. Take for example this Qing Dynasty plate, painted yellow with two five-toed dragons, fit for royalty. While the plate's (re)location in Taiwan represents some attachment between the island and the original Chinese owner, the tradition it represents bears little resemblance to the Taiwan that I saw. I do not therefore personally consider the ROC to be the continuation of dynastic China, as it once definitively claimed to be. However, to be Taiwanese can be to identify with the preservation and legacy of a long-lost "China".

Photos 3a and 3b: Everyday Chinese Culture

While Taiwan (and to be clear, the PRC alike) is politically a once-removed cousin of some "China" of the past, Chinese culture is alive and well in Taiwanese society. This is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that Mandarin is the dominant language of Taiwan. Notably, Taiwan still uses traditional Chinese characters, which in contrast to the Qing-era plate does symbolize some historical continuity. Language is crucial to identity because the structure and vocabulary of the language(s) we use frames the way we think about and express our sense of self. I suspect that ROC citizens would share in common with PRC citizens and other Mandarin speakers a similar way of interpreting the world based on their shared usage of Mandarin. For example, one consequence of Taiwan being a Mandarin-speaking place is the fact that none of the hotels the class stayed at had a fourth floor, given the linguistically rooted superstition linking "four" and "death".

We were also introduced to Chinese culture through Chef Wayne, an ethnically Han man who led my favorite excursion, guiding the class through a local street market and later teaching us how to prepare delicious Taiwanese dumplings. Chef Wayne used ingredients and recipes from the Fujian and Guangdong provinces from which many Taiwanese citizens trace their lineage. During his cooking class, Chef Wayne repeatedly referenced China and Chinese food, as if to eat Taiwanese food is to eat Chinese food. I heard throughout this trip that Taiwanese food features more mild flavor profiles than mainland Chinese food, but these differences could be considered regional variations of the "same" cuisine.

One thing that makes it arguable to conflate Taiwanese and Chinese culture is that the overwhelming majority of Taiwanese citizens are ethnically Han Chinese. In his book *Taipei: City of Displacements,* Allen (2011) describes how in response to difficulties assimilating Taiwanese people to Japanese culture, Japanese elites in Taiwan celebrated Chinese literature, which was still revered by the Japanese but "more authentically the cultural property of the

Taiwanese". Even if a Han Taiwanese person doesn't identify as Chinese, it is likely that they would find their cultural beliefs and practices largely compatible with - if not the same as - Chinese culture.

Photo 4: Overlapping Traditions in Shared Space

Taiwan's people are a good cultural fit for the ambiguous and complicated nature of the island's human environment. While in other parts of the world war has been waged over trivial differences of interpretation regarding the same sacred scripture, many Taiwanese people worship in temples suitable for at least three religions (Buddhism, Daoism, and local folk religions, like worship of the sea goddess Mazu seen above). Buddhist beliefs regarding the universalism of humanity (Denton, 2021b) at least partially explain Taiwanese people's relative religious tolerance; if all of humanity is connected, then peaceful coexistence and acceptance of differing experiences is the logical way to live. Spiritual compatibility between the main religions represented, including similar philosophies and methods of worship, also contribute to the plurality. .

Taiwan's religious tolerance is a good symbol and indicator for broader acceptance of plurality within the nation. After martial law ended, the Taiwanese people were able to openly contest dominant historical narratives and had greater freedom to negotiate their own identities out loud. These processes led Taiwan to be redefined as a pluralistic society, in contrast to the uniformly nationalistic society that the KMT curated prior (Denton, 2011a).

Then a candidate for mayor of Taipei, Ma Ying-jeou spoke in 1998 of a "new Taiwanese" people inclusive of Aboriginal Taiwanese people, new arrivals, and anyone in between "who lives in and loves Taiwan" (Ma Ying-Jeou, 1998, as cited in Dreyer, 2003). It seems that the modern Taiwanese elite are not only tolerant of diversity within Taiwanese identity but desire it. To be Taiwanese is to graciously coexist and hold difference as sacred, understanding that all Taiwanese people (and perhaps all humans) are united by some invisible bond.

Photo 5: Enduring Outside Influence

In addition to the diverse groups of migrants who have made Taiwan their home and thus become local, there have been multiple temporary occupiers on the island. Some, like the Dutch, had a significant impact on the island but have minimal persisting influence. Others, like the Japanese, have been deeply formative to Taiwanese identity. For example, upon arrival to Taiwan many nationalist soldiers faced frustration over the Japanese character and affinity of some Taiwanese locals.

Today, Taiwan's relationships to foreigners are much more indirect and - by force of circumstance - informal. While as implicated in the previous paragraph one could argue that Japanese culture has become indigenous to Taiwan, I consider modern Japanese pop culture to be different than the forms of Japanese culture that were authentically integrated into Taiwan over a century ago, and therefore Japanese pop culture is foreign.

The two main outside influences on modern Taiwanese culture appear to be Japan and the United States. Japanese influence can be seen in Taiwan's obsession with cute cartoon mascots, cultural imports like anime and gashapons, and in the popularity of shiba inus as a family pet.

While Japan's influence is regionally and historically rooted, America's is the consequence of its international hegemony. The United States and the British Empire it emerged from have made English the global lingua franca, and thus English can be seen in Taiwan almost as commonly as Mandarin. But in Taiwan, American influence wins out, as the island's public transit system (MRT) speaks in an American accent. American companies such as Disney,

McDonalds, Starbucks, and of course 7 Eleven are prevalent here. To be cosmopolitan in 2023, as Taipei is, it is essentially impossible to not in some way replicate American culture.

Photo 6: A Free Country(?)

From my perspective, Taiwan shares significant similarities with Ukraine. Both Taiwan and Ukraine have had the cultural underpinnings of a distinct national identity for centuries due to a complicated history of both isolation and occupation, but up until recently have been considered nothing more than a region within a great power state. Secondly, a greater percentage of both Ukrainians and Taiwanese people have been identifying as such (and not as Russian or Chinese), partially in reaction to the existential threat of those more forceful powers. Both countries began their independent governance as dictatorships, but less than a half century ago peacefully transitioned into democracies through nonviolent revolution and have since seen an improved quality of life for the average citizen. Both are countries that the United States in theory ideologically supports but is unwilling to commit to militarily protecting in case of an attack.

Chu Yun-han and Lin Jia-lung (as cited in Rigger, 2003) define nationality as "a sense of shared identity among people who believe in their belonging to the same nation but do not

necessarily demand that the nation constitutes one sovereign state". This definition of nationhood fits Taiwan, which has some collective sense of a distinct self but has split opinions on reunification versus independence. While the formal status of Taiwan is debatable even among its populace, it seems that pride in democracy and a preference for de facto self-governance is an important part of Taiwanese identity for many, especially the younger generation.

Photo 7: Just Beneath the Surface, Perpetual Threat

Part of the politics of culture, in general, is the preservation and identification with a culture becomes drastically more important when that culture is facing the impending threat of eradication. In such a situation, expressions of identity are acts of resistance against the oppressive force. Identity becomes a tool for organization and must be made inclusive enough to encourage maximum participation, yet exclusive enough to be meaningful in opposition to the threat. This helps explain why Taiwan's governing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which is provocative on the independence issue, takes such an inclusive stance on what it means to be Taiwanese. As a democracy, the sentiment of the ruling party is expected to coincide with the will of a majority of its constituents. In a recent poll, more than 60% of Taiwan's 23-million strong population now identifies as just Taiwanese, compared with 2% who identify solely as Chinese (Qin & Chang Chien, 2022). In the 1990's, far fewer Taiwanese people identified as Taiwanese and far more identified as Chinese. It appears that more Taiwanese people are supportive of the status quo rather than formal independence from the PRC (if only because they wish to avoid war), yet Taiwan must prepare for the possibility that the choice between independence or reunification will be made for them.

The presence of air raid shelters throughout Taiwan, built into existing infrastructure and labeled clearly throughout Taipei, indicates an acceptance of the possibility of war. This is not to say that Taiwan wants war, but that its government understands that the risk is present and increasing and is planning accordingly. The makeshift shelters are reminiscent of the more permanent ones built in Keelung under Japanese occupation during World War II (Cave & Chang Chien, 2022). Taiwan has had a tumultuous and uncertain history, and so its people have adapted to uncertainty over the future.

To the average American (whose only education on Taiwan may have been news of former Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit and the PRC's coinciding reaction), Taiwan is a dangerous place, a ticking time bomb. This is not the lived experience that I observed in Taiwan. If Taiwanese people are constantly in existential anxiety, they don't show it. While hoping that war never comes to this island, I know that Taiwan's preparations will give it some type of advantage. Rather than being an endangered identity on track to inevitable extinction, it is most likely that if China were to attack, a distinct Taiwanese identity would find ways to survive. The history of resistance

by Indigenous Taiwanese peoples, Chinese descendants, and others in

Taiwan against Japanese and KMT rule serves as a reminder that culture and identity cannot easily be destroyed.

Photo 8: Definitely Not American

Though inevitably influenced by the United States (which is to some extent true of every country in the world), Taiwan is not American. In studying a foreign culture, it is easiest to notice the differences - rather than the similarities - between the culture under study and one's own.

In a few key ways, Taiwan is very American. Both places were first settled by non- indigenous groups at a similar time and now have a population that is overwhelmingly non- indigenous. Both cultures are capitalist and workaholic to the extreme. Both can now be defined as multicultural, multiethnic democracies (Denton, 2021a) and both are ideologically opposed to the PRC.

That being said, Taiwanese people don't live like Americans do. One of the main things I noticed is how difficult it is to find a trash can in public in Taiwan, while in the United States there is practically one in sight at any given point in time. I deduced that Taiwanese people must be less wasteful than Americans (I can't imagine locals carrying around pieces of trash for hours at a time as I often did). Taiwanese people still seem to enjoy consumerism to a similar degree as Americans, with an abundance of non-essential shops and no shortage of plastic packaging, yet they find some way to avoid both trash cans and litter. It sounds ridiculous, but the absence of trash cans was the most noticeable cultural difference I encountered. To be Taiwanese is to need a trash can less often than an American.

Photos 9a and 9b: A Society Built By and For Human Connection

Sociologically, how the built environment is designed is of great interest to me. The ways we choose to utilize space reflect our society's values and in turn affect our daily lives, mood, and even long-term health. Dreyer (2003) points out that when people from Fujian immigrated to Taiwan, the change in natural environment forced them to change their materials, techniques, and practices. Taiwanese society is thus the result of chosen adaptations to life on the island to fit the needs and preferences of all those who came to live there.

Most Taiwanese people live in apartments, not big homes, but they seem to spend their time (when not working) out and about. Shops are open late into the evening (while on a weekday in the U.S they might close before one gets off of work) and many people seem to take advantage of that fact. There is an abundance of green space and parks, with tables and chairs to play board games. In Taiwan, it is even possible to get in a good strength training workout

outside. There is a well-designed public transportation system that can take you nearly anywhere on the island, safe and intuitive enough that I saw young children confidently traveling alone on multiple occasions.

The dense population of Taiwan and the abundant opportunities to exist in public spaces basically demands that Taiwanese people build community. There is always a stranger to get to know or to help, and I have met several Taiwanese people bolder than the average American, choosing to strike up conversation with someone they don't know. These conversations were usually not "small talk" but either practical (offering help) or substantive (genuinely trying to build connection). In an environment where choosing not to help a stranger with a bad MRT card could make you late to work, or where choosing to check out a new hike could earn you a close friend, it is only natural that Taiwanese people would be (on average) so open to human interaction. When the space that you're living in is designed to cultivate community, strong collective identity becomes an organic process and an inevitability.

Photo 10: Unique Identifiers

Liking or making boba does not make one Taiwanese, and boba is arguably a trivial part of what it means to be Taiwanese. However, it is a point of pride for Taiwan and the most salient cultural identifier I can think of and is therefore worthy of brief note.

"With the pressure from Mainland China a constant impediment to Taiwan's entry into the world of nations, Taiwan must seek ways to assert its presence at the 'soft' cultural level" (Denton, 2021b). The most successful symbol of Taiwanese identity abroad is boba tea. I half expected boba to be more popular in America than in Taiwan and was certainly surprised to see that almost every street I walked had at least one (and often many more) boba shops on it. I do not know if boba was intentionally marketed abroad to increase recognition and affinity for Taiwan, but given how delicious it is I could just as easily believe that boba was popularized spontaneously.

"Things" like boba - cultural items that are uniquely associated with a particular identity group - can help build legitimacy for an identity otherwise struggling to assert itself. If boba is readily recognizable as being Taiwanese, then it becomes a tool to validate Taiwanese identity in the eyes of outsiders. Cultural capital is an underrated form of power that Taiwan may be able to utilize in the future to expand business opportunities, inspire nationalism, and even vie for international recognition. This is the art of cultural diplomacy.

Conclusion

In some ways, it feels impossible to define Taiwanese identity, both because I am an outsider who considers self-determination to be the most important part of identity discourse, but also because it is practically challenging to pin down its defining characteristics. In fact, the characteristics that I would define as intrinsic to what it means to be Taiwanese are complexity and multiplicity. However, it is also clear that Taiwanese identity is not simply an amalgamation of other, less elusive identities, but something in and of its own. Namely, there is a definitive Chinese character to being Taiwanese, yet Taiwanese identity often transcends what it means to be Chinese. On an island whose long-term history is marked by complication and change, to be Taiwanese is to embrace the collective identity with an acceptance of the ambiguity of its details.

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